Collecting and empire

Follow the trail
Exploring Collecting and empire

Founded in 1753, the British Museum’s history is intimately connected to that of the British Empire. From around 1500 to the mid-20th century, Britain and a number of other countries built and maintained overseas empires. A substantial part of the British Empire’s wealth came from the transatlantic slave trade and the colonial exploitation of people and resources.

This trail highlights some of the varied, complex and occasionally controversial journeys of objects to the Museum, mainly between the 1750s and early 1900s. Sometimes objects were acquired directly but often they were collected first by individuals, only coming to the Museum at a later date.

This trail takes in several galleries, mostly on the Ground floor. Viewing all the objects, in the order listed, will take about 70 minutes. When you visit an object you’ll find more information there about how the Museum acquired it.
Lion statues of Amenhotep III
Room 4
In 1829 Lord Prudhoe, the Duke of Northumberland, arranged the shipment of these lions to England from Jebel Barkal, Sudan. He donated them to the British Museum in 1835.

Human-headed winged bull
Room 8
This Assyrian sculpture was excavated by Austen Henry Layard and Hormuzd Rassam. They shipped it to England with the permission of the Ottoman authorities. The Museum acquired it in 1850.

The Nereid Monument
Room 17
The Ottoman Sultanate in Constantinople (Istanbul) authorised Charles Fellows’ excavations at Xanthos and his subsequent removal of parts of the Nereid monument, a fourth-century BC tomb.

Statue of Ankhrenepnefer
Room 4
This temple statue was excavated by the Egypt Exploration Fund in 1883 and presented to the British Museum. It was a diplomatic gift from the Egyptian ruler, Khedive Mohamed Tawfiq Pasha (1852–92).

Ancestral screen from Nigeria
Room 25
This is one of 11 ancestral screens entrusted by Kalabari chiefs to a British administrative officer between 1914 and 1916, to save them from destruction by a local fundamentalist Christian movement.

Palace door and lintel from Nigeria
Room 25
This door, carved for the palace at Ikere in Nigeria, was displayed in 1924 at the British Empire Exhibition, Wembley. It was presented to the Museum by the Ogoga (king) of Ikere who was given a European-style throne made in Britain in return.
Military tunic from Sudan
Room 25
This officer’s tunic was taken after the battle of Atbara as spoils of war in 1898, following the defeat of Sudanese nationalist forces by an Anglo-Egyptian army. The widow of the commander of the British Brigade at Atbara subsequently presented it to the Museum.

Potlatch Kwakwaka’wakw mask from Canada
Room 26
Seized by the Canadian authorities during a potlatch ceremony in 1921, then illegal under Canadian law, this mask was sold to a private collector who eventually donated it to the British Museum.

West African drum, collected in Virginia
Room 26
This drum, made by the Akan people, Ghana, was taken to Virginia during the period of the slave trade and came to the British Museum as part of its founding collection, bequeathed by Sir Hans Sloane.

Puppets and masks from Java
Room 1
Sir Stamford Raffles, who established Singapore as a British port, collected large numbers of objects, including those on display here, while serving as Lieutenant-Governor of Java in the 1810s.

Soup plate from China
Room 1
Commodore Lord Anson of the British East India Company circumnavigated the world in 1743. He commissioned a porcelain dinner service, including this plate, on a visit to Canton in 1747.

Moche sculptures from the Macabi Islands, Peru
Room 1
These sculptures were discovered during the removal of guano (bird excrement) by a British company in the 1800s. The demand for this high quality fertiliser led some countries, including the UK, to exploit guano-rich islands.
Shield from New South Wales, Australia
Room 1
The details of the acquisition of this shield are not known but it is likely that it was collected in the early days of the British colony at Sydney from 1788 and received at the Museum by 1817.

A ritual seat from the Bahamas
Room 1
This Taino stool was made in the Caribbean between 1186 and 1273. It was found by an enslaved man, James Thompson, who sold it to a missionary in 1835. It was donated to the Museum in 1918.

Figure from Polynesia
Room 2
This sculpture was acquired by the London Missionary Society when they converted the people of Mangareva, French Polynesia, to Christianity in the mid-19th century.

Pukara, a painting from Western Australia
Room 24
Pukara, featuring ancestral Dreaming sites, was painted for sale in 2013 by senior Aboriginal men of the Pila Nguru (Spinifex people) of the desert region of Western Australia.

Dance costume from Kiribati
Room 24
Members of the Kiribati community in Britain donated items to enable the Museum to display a complete dance costume as part of a co-curated project.

Milk vessel from Somalia, Room 24
Diana Powell-Cotton, an ethnographic collector and photographer, purchased this vessel along with other items during a fieldtrip to Italian Somaliland in 1934–35. She subsequently donated it to the Museum.
Betel-nut cutter from Sri Lanka
Room 33
Hugh Nevill was a British colonial official who spent most of his life in Sri Lanka. He acquired this cutter for preparing the narcotic betel-nut from the Kandyan Society of Arts.

Sword from India
Room 33
Tipu Sultan, who ruled the powerful kingdom of Mysore, died defending his capital when the British captured it in 1799 and took this sword as a trophy.

Thuggee model from India
Room 33
This model was made in Madras (present-day Chennai) for a British railway owner. He gave it to the Museum in 1847. It reflects a colonial stereotype.
This map shows the locations of the objects in this trail.
Lower floor

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Follow the trail

Look out for this logo to help you find the objects.
Short of time?

If you only have half an hour, focus on these three objects:

1. **Lion statues of Amenhotep III**
   Room 4
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9. **West African drum, collected in Virginia**
   Room 26
   This drum, made by the Akan people, Ghana, was taken to Virginia during the period of the slave trade and came to the British Museum as part of its founding collection, bequeathed by Sir Hans Sloane.

17. **Dance costume from Kiribati**
   Room 24
   Members of the Kiribati community in Britain donated items to enable the Museum to display a complete dance costume as part of a co-curated project.

The Museum regularly lends objects to other institutions around the world. This means that from time to time, some of the featured objects may be temporarily removed from display.
Further objects will be added to this selection in the future as the result of ongoing research and collaborative work.

Ancestral screen from Nigeria, 19th century.